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RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1118
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3415
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1120
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO PRIORITY 0106
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0715
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0078
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2971
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 000942

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [KDEM](#) [SCUL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHILD SLAYINGS DEMONSTRATIONS CONTINUE FOR SECOND
DAY

REF: CARACAS 00939

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

11. (C) The government has begun reacting to the spontaneous public outcry over the murder of three kidnapped children and their driver (Reftel). Venezuelan Interior Minister Jesse Chacon expressed his government's condolences late April 5 for the deaths amidst widespread pot-banging protests. Chacon announced that the government was hot on the trail of the murderers. The BRV's response to the incident appeared uncoordinated as protests continued for a second day in Caracas and the countryside. There were also marches by journalists and students protesting the shooting death on April 5 of photographer Jorge Aguirre during the protests. The mayor of Caracas' Baruta municipality told Ambassador April 6 that the opposition and media had bungled the protests by focusing on a wealthy part of the city associated with the failed demonstrations of 2002-03. Violent crime is an issue that plagues Chavez' base--the poor majority--more than the wealthy. It remains to be seen whether the protests will continue, particularly over the weekend as Caracas empties next week for Holy Week holidays. The government will likely look for opportunities to use this incident to centralize security forces and attack the media and the political opposition. End summary.

12. (U) With mandatory TV coverage on a national cadena, Venezuelan Interior Minister Jesse Chacon held a press conference late April 5 to express condolences to the

families of the three young brothers and their driver murdered recently outside Caracas. Chacon assured listeners the government was close to catching the murderers. He also said the government had detained three people in the case of the March 29 kidnapping and murder of an Italian businessman, including one Aragua State police officer accused of providing police uniforms for the kidnappers. Chacon announced the creation of a national commission made up of academics, businessmen, clergy, police, government officials, and soldiers to advise the National Assembly as it drafted the National Police Law, which would centralize Venezuelan security forces.

Chaos Reigns in Slaying Aftermath

13. (U) As Chacon began his national address, pot-banging protests erupted spontaneously throughout Caracas. Pot-banging is a traditional Venezuelan method of demonstrating dissatisfaction with the government. It is technically illegal.

14. (U) Reactions from other BRV officials thus far have appeared uncoordinated. Federal police director Marcos Chavez attributed the attack to common petty thuggery ("hampa comun"), while Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez blamed organized crime. National Assembly President Nicolas Maduro said Colombian paramilitaries could have been involved. (Note: Colombians are the bete noir of Venezuelans on security issues, with Colombians often being blamed for any violence. Maduro, in turn, ties the paramilitaries to the USG, thereby making us responsible for most Venezuelan crime.) Meanwhile, Mayor Barreto appears out in front of the police reform process. The press reported March 30 that

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Barreto was arming neighborhood security networks with old .38 revolvers formerly wielded by the metropolitan police (PM). He said his administration had fired 5,000 members of the force and had begun prosecuting officers whose files had been languishing in PM internal affairs. Separately, Barreto called for the BRV telecom regulator (CONATEL) to intervene in the media coverage of the Faddoul case, which he said was being manipulated to put the government in a bad light. (TV station Globovision reported receiving a CONATEL warning the same afternoon. President Chavez has remained silent on this incident and the public outcry, allowing his subordinates to take the heat on the issue.

15. (U) Regarding the April 5 shooting death of photographer Jose Aguirre, details aired about the case have been muddled. Newspaper websites are displaying a photo taken by the photographer murdered April 5 during a demonstration as alleged evidence that his assailant was a metropolitan police officer. RSO reports that the escaping attacker's motorcycle was different from that used by most officers. Chacon also dismissed the photo as proof, although he accepted that police could have been involved. Attorney General Rodriguez announced on April 6 that two special prosecutors had been named to investigate the crime.

Marches Continue

16. (U) Several marches were underway on April 6. In the morning, journalists marched in silence to the Attorney General's Office, where march leaders read their statement on air to a waiting Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez. A small group of several hundred college students marched as well to the site of the Papal Nuncio, where they were met by Nuncio Giacinto Berlocco. Groups also gathered at several points in the city to block traffic. Protesters forced traffic down to one lane and then wrote on the cars in chalk as they passed through. A larger march was planned for the afternoon to the

Ministry of Interior and Justice, organized by opposition political groups (Accion Democratica, National Resistance Command, Gente de Petroleo, et. al.). March organizers said they would demand the resignation of Minister Chacon and Mayor Barreto.

Opposition Mayor Responds

¶7. (C) Ambassador met with Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles on another issue the morning of April 6. Capriles described the previous day's events as "very important" because of the spontaneous nature of the protests. He quickly added, however, that to gain political traction from the protests would require organization. He admitted this would be difficult given that university students, which comprised the nucleus of the demonstrations, would go on Holy Week break on the weekend. Capriles also criticized the opposition, and especially pro-opposition all-news channel Globovision, for having focused on the Altamira demonstrations in eastern Caracas. Venezuelans identify Altamira with the political opposition's failed demonstrations of 2002-04, giving the demonstrations the feel of previous failures. Capriles himself was leading the demonstration downtown at the Ministry of Interior and Justice, definitely pro-Chavez territory.

¶8. (C) Capriles commented that the BRV had handled the protests intelligently, choosing only to use the National

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Guard in the eastern Caracas area of Altamira. This added to the public impression that only "millionaires" were demonstrating. (Note: This was the impression one got from watching the coverage, but opposition media historically fails to cover demonstrations in Caracas' poorer, less safe neighborhoods.) He also predicted the BRV would use the Faddoul case to press forward with the creation of the National Police, which he predicted would be Chavez' new instrument of political control. He questioned the BRV's presumption, however, that a few changes in police management would placate the demonstrators. Capriles said Minister Chacon must be feeling pressure from the protests, and said he would propose weekly demonstrations at Chacon's office until the Faddoul case was solved. Capriles was not surprised that Chacon gave the official government response the night before, instead of Chavez. Capriles noted that Venezuelans who strongly support Chavez often do not support the government proper, and especially do not like Chacon or Barreto. Chavez would have added some legitimacy to the protests, Capriles said, had he come out personally to comment.

Who Are the Faddouls?

¶9. (U) This Lebanese Christian family immigrated to Canada some years ago. Subsequently Mr. Faddoul, the father of the boys, moved to Venezuela and married. The three slain children all have both Canadian and Venezuelan citizenship. The Embassy contacted the Canadian Embassy and expressed its sincere condolences. The Canadian Ambassador was out at the funeral ceremony, but reportedly told her staff that the demonstrations were noteworthy because they included all social classes. Following the funeral this afternoon, Mrs. Faddoul gave a very powerful, strongly anti-Chavez statement to the press.

Comment

¶10. (C) The horror of the crime against three vulnerable children--one of whom was handicapped--has channeled the

festering discontent of Chavez opponents into action. Indeed, this could be the first chink in Chavez' armor since the recall referendum drive. The protesters, mainly women and children, are giving the government a black eye. Lacking a positive way to spin the tragedy, Chavez notably delegated to Chacon rather than addressing it himself. Although kidnappers tend to victimize the wealthy, violent crime in general is an issue that primarily effects Chavez' poor voting base. Polls indicate that crime and unemployment are the two top concerns of poor communities. 30-50 people are murdered each weekend in Caracas, and many of the victims are young. Still, these murders have not galvanized the poor community against Chavez, and it is unclear the extent to which the poor from the barrios are joining in the protests. The protests may fizzle as, in addition to students, many Venezuelans leave town for all of Holy Week, which begins April 9.

11. (C) That the crime may be "solved" soon is of concern. Venezuelan prosecutors and police have an abysmal record of bringing murderers to justice. A speedy arrest often suggests either extensive government involvement in the kidnapping--in which case the easily identified perpetrators would be forced to roll over--or politically motivated scapegoating, such as in the Danilo Anderson case. In

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addition, as noted in Minister Chacon and Mayor Barreto's statements, the government will seek to use these events to secure further centralization and control of security forces, and when possible to place blame on the media and opposition. BROWNFIELD